# HOLY WARS: THE ORIGINS AND EFFECTS OF THE CRUSADES

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In the late 11th century, circumstances converged to create the Crusades, the series of military expeditions to fight the armies of Islam in the Holy Land. Papal interest in expanding the influence of the Vatican in secular matters in Western Europe and in gaining influence in the Eastern Roman Empire caused first Gregory VII then Urban II to call for crusades against the moslems. In a society wracked with violence, the possibility of sending restless landless knights to fight for the Cross – and for precious land – in the East, seemed an extra benefit. Individual reasons for crusading varied: deep piety, military adventurism, the lure of absolution and desire to appease the church all seemed to be factors; as the crusades passed, the intent of many of the crusaders became more secular and less pious and this culminated in the disastrous Fourth Crusade.

In 638 AD, the moslem armies of the Caliph Omar conquered Jerusalem, and the Eastern Roman Empire lost the most Holy City of Christendom. The moslems allowed the Jews and Christian – the People of the Book – to continue to use their places of worship and people of all three faiths co-existed for centuries (Runciman 1). It was over four hundred years before Christendom would attempt to retake Jerusalem, and only then when the armies of the Seljuk Turks had threatened the Eastern Emperor in Constantinople. Yet Christendom had fought the armies of Islam for many years. The Reconquista in Iberia had set a precedent for christianity which the papacy of the 11th century seized upon: the Islamic idea of "jihad" or Holy War would appear to be a perfect solution to some pressing problems (Cantor 290).

The popes of the 11th century looked to increase not only their power over the church but their secular powers too. Secular rulers such as Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor, had begun to challenge the power of the popes. This culminated in the Investiture Controversy which made relations between pope Gregory VII and Henry IV so poor that Gregory excommunicated the Emperor. In the light of these problems and the continuing furore over the reforms of the church he had encouraged, Gregory was unable to persuade the nobility of Europe to go on Crusade, although he did try. In 1074, he wrote: "a pagan race [has] overcome the Christians and with horrible cruelty had devastated everything almost to the walls of Constantinople […] If we love God and wish to be recognized as Christians, […] we should lay down our lives to liberate them" (Thatcher, "Gregory VII"). Gregory was a great inspiration to the next pope Urban II and doubtless Urban was thinking of his mentor when he devised his own call for a crusade.

Urban knew, as Gregory had before him, that if the papacy could persuade the nobility of Europe to go to war on behalf of the church, it might be enable the pope to claim jurisdiction over warfare (Holmes 128), and would certainly be an "expression of [the pope's] moral leadership of the western worlds" (Cantor 290). Gregory VII was a strong proponent of this latter ideal, and it was Gregory's reforms which both thwarted his own efforts to ignite a crusade and that enabled his successor to succeed where he failed. These reforms, known as the Gregorian reforms, were both spiritual and organisational. Inspired by the Cluniac monks, he aimed to purify the church which was in danger of becoming lax and corrupt. He imposed new standards of clerical behavior, education and competence. In addition, he reorganised the bureaucracy of the church, emphasising the pope's own authority, and made it more consistent and answerable to the Vatican. At first, the reforms were very controversial and this together with Gregory's quarrel with the German emperor meant he could not gain enough support for his crusade. By the time

of Urban II, however, the organisational changes enabled Urban to muster the resources to support a crusade and increased power to persuade the secular lords. Importantly, the religious reforms had inspired a new wave of religious piety in Europe (Bull "Origins" 24).

The pope did not merely want increased influence over Western Europe, however. He wished for increased influence in the East, in the Byzantine Empire. The Great Schism in 1054 of the two factions of the church, Latin and Greek, was still fresh in the memory, and the Vatican was keen to regain supremacy of the Greek Church. This they could not do so simply, nor by force, and the pope must surely have hoped that by aiding the East in its fight with the infidels, they could at least gain some moral supremacy that might ultimately lead to a healing of the rift. If that was impossible, having the Eastern Emperor beholden to the Latin church would be only slightly less advantageous (Cantor 291).

Finally, the pope could consider more practical effects of a crusade. Western Europe was a militaristic land, ruled by feudal lords (Bull "Origins" 18). Primogeniture, the system of inheritance by which a single son inherits all, became standard practice in France and Germany over the course of the 10th and 11th centuries (Holmes 119). This, together with growing population within the nobility, meant that there was a rise in the number of landless younger sons. Without a strong central authority or legal system, these young men would often turn to force in order to usurp others from precious land. This resulted in a culture of violence, of duels and bloodshed that both the secular and spiritual lords were keen to bring to an end. Jonathan Phillips argues that the high cost of crusading would deter many fathers from sending their sons simply for this reason (Phillips, para 11). However it could certainly be a factor for some, and one that influenced the thinking of the pope. The church had long tried to curb societal violence, with little success.

In 1095, the Eastern Emperor, Alexius, sent envoys to Urban II asking to aid against the Seljuk Turks who had conquered much of Asia Minor and appeared to threaten Constantinople itself. This was the ideal opportunity for Urban. At the Council of Clermont in 1095 he called for a crusade against the infidel. It would appear from chroniclers of the time that he gave a passioned speech to the assembly. Urban's words, as recorded by an anonymous writer, made clear the Christian duty: "If anyone desired to follow the Lord zealously, with a pure heart and mind, and wished faithfully to bear the cross after Him, he would no longer hesitate to take up the way to the Holy Sepulchre [church in Jerusalem]" ("Gesta"). But Urban, recognising his predecessor's failure, was sure to emphasis the benefits of crusading as well as the obligation to christians. In an open letter to crusaders in 1095, he made sure to mention crusades as "a preparation for the remission of all their sins" (Urban II).

From the time of Pope John VIII, indulgences had been offered to those who fought in defence of the church, as John wrote in 878 "…Those who, out of love to the Christian religion, shall die in battle fighting bravely against pagans or unbelievers, shall receive eternal life […] we absolve, as far as is permissible, all such and commend them by our prayers to the Lord" (Thatcher, "John VIII"). Urban knew the power of such indulgences. The people of the middle ages were strong believers in the church and especially in sin. They also believed that sins could be remedied by acts of penance (Bull "Origins" 31). This was fortunate, as violence and sin seemed to be second nature to many of the medieval nobility. At first, encouraged by the Cluniac reforms, the act of pilgrimage would be used as penance, and Marcus Bull argues strongly that pilgrimage was a major influence upon the crusades (Bull "Pilgrimage"). Yet with crusading, there was a chance to wipe the slate clean. Certainly, it would appear that this need for redemption could have inspired one major crusader. A guilt-stricken and very pious Louis VII of France seemed to have led the 2nd Crusade at least in part as reparation for the massacres of Vitry-sur-Marne (Weir 46). Even so, indulgences would not have been enough – they had not been for Gregory VII after all – but there had been a great upswelling of religious devotion and even fanaticism in the wake of the Cluniac/Gregorian

church reforms, and that made redemption from sin and service to the church seem all the more attractive.

Not all crusaders went out of piety, although this had to be a major factor. Some, like Richard I of England, were military adventurers who used rather transparent piety as an excuse to go to war. Others, such as Raymond IV of St Gilles, had fought in the Reconquista and were eager for fresh challenges against the infidels (Holmes 181). To others, the prospect of land to settle upon was also a factor. Although again, Phillips points out that few crusaders remained in the Holy Land, it does not preclude the possibility that some intended to stay but changed their minds (Phillips, para 15). Nor does it mean that land and wealth were not strong reasons for some crusaders. Indeed, some crusaders would seem to have little else on their minds and the Byzantine Empire was soon alarmed by their interest in the Eastern lands (Holmes 199). Anna Comnena, the daughter of Emperor Alexius wrote of a common fear among the Byzantines: "the more astute, especially men like Bohemund and those of like mind, had another secret reason, namely, the hope that while on their travels they might by some means be able to seize the capital itself, looking upon this as a kind of corollary" (Anna Comnena, 250). Finally, the prospect of treasure was a constant attraction and become more so with subsequent crusades. The Fourth Crusade hardly even bothered to feign interest in the Holy Land and descended instead upon a stricken Constantinople.

The immediate object of the crusades – to free to Holy Land of the scourge of the infidel – failed. The armies of Islam were just as strong, ultimately more committed and zealous, more entrenched and on their home territory. The armies of God soon lost faith in the enterprise and, far from home, could only hold their acquisitions for short periods. However, the crusades did have a lasting effect beyond the intent of Urban and his successors. As Simon Lloyd notes "The effects of the crusading movement were almost limitless. Few aspects of the contemporary western world […] were not affected or influenced in some way, directly or indirectly" (Lloyd 64). They ultimately weakened the church and allowed the strengthening of noble power; brought a certain amount of internal peace to European nations; fuelled the growth of mercantilism; gave a European identity to the people's of the West and ultimately allowed the Turks to dominate the Middle East.

The power of the church was temporarily strengthened during the crusades. The popes gained effective control over large armies of pious knights which they could use for their own ends, and the support of the crusaders could be argued to have allowed the popes to stave off the challenge from the Hohenstaufen emperors (Lloyd 64). However, the popes' use of "crusades" and crusaders to harm their enemies finally backfired. The looting of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade at the behest of Innocent III was followed by a crusade against Frederick II in the 1240s and against Aragon in the 1280s. From the original ideals, the crusades had descended to a mere political tool. This was apparent to many people and in turn discredited the papacy (Cantor 300). In this environment, the kings of Europe were able to strengthen their position and never again were truly at the will of the Vatican. With the relative peace at home that the crusades brought, they were able to reform their legal systems, their bureaucracies and thus consolidate their positions. From this came the growth of nation states that led to colonialism and remains the structure of Europe to this day.

The vast cost of the crusades fuelled another important long-term effect of the Crusades. For example, Henry II of England alone gave 60,000 marks of his personal money (equivalent to almost twice his annual crown income (Dyer 29)) as a contribution to the third crusade (Map 483). The constant need for supplies: horses, food, weaponry, transport and all the other accoutrements of crusading provided a valuable market for the emerging city states of Italy. The First Crusade also had managed to secure much of the shoreline of the Mediterranean from the Muslims, which it was never again able to threaten, thus allowing an easier passage of goods through this valuable conduit (Cantor 302). This allowed for the growth of the Italian city states and it was this growth and wealth

that in turn fuelled both the exploration of new worlds and the rebirth of culture in the Renaissance.

The crusades had negative influences too: the encouraging of a Western Christian identity in Europe not only led to internal self-awareness, but also, more worryingly, to xenophobia, anti-semitism and the schism between west and non-west that has never fully been healed (Lloyd 64). It also allowed the expansion of the Seljuk Turks and their finally taking Constantinople in 1453. However, although the city was thus lost to Christianity, there were some positive effects. With the fall of the city, many scholars fled west taking with them works saved from antiquity. As they reached Western Europe, they helped the blossoming scholarship of the Renaissance.

The crusades were created as a solution to the needs of the papacy to gain status and power in both western and eastern Europe; to answer the need to find a purpose for the landless young nobles wreaking havoc in Europe and to halt the progress of the infidels. Crusaders, fired by piety or merely seeking indulgences, land, loot or adventure, were keen to answer the church's call. While the crusades did not have the ultimate effect the west had hoped for, it is clear that they had profound effects that ripple through history to the present time.

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